

State at the bottom

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Paul Revere rode the New England countryside more than 200 years ago, issuing his famous warning. It would be foolish to imagine a man on horseback today, feverishly shouting of an enemy on the horizon. We would think the rider a pint too deep at the inn.

But what will it take to wake up the state of Florida to a different sort of peril today? And what will it take for leaders to listen?

This is the threat: Florida ranks 50th, as in last, in state spending on education, according to the latest study by the National Education Association. The state's production of bachelor's degrees ranks 30th, yet another year of funding cuts to education is emerging in Tallahassee. It will have devastating effects on our community.

At Miami Dade College, recent fall enrollment was 18 percent higher than in 2006. But the state has not contributed its share, amounting to 35,000 unfunded students at MDC, a loss of \$39 million. And the news just gets worse: MDC's budget has been cut by 11.3 percent, an additional \$21 million in losses since 2007-08; \$27 million in lost state matching funds for scholarships and new programs; \$110 million behind in state maintenance and renovation allocations.

MDC understands "doing more with less" all too well. The national praise for excellence and productivity is well-earned by faculty, staff and students. This institution prides itself on accountability, but, clearly, we are at the end of our elasticity. There is no more that can be done with so little.

The fallout occurs on the backs of students. Thirty thousand MDC students could not find necessary classes because we could not afford to open new class sections. The real tragedy: 5,000 students were closed out of classes altogether. It is painfully apparent that MDC is no longer an open-door institution.

How crucial is this?

Sixty-one percent of the graduates of the nation's fourth-largest school system who attend college in Florida do so at MDC. For most of them, MDC is their only option to gain a college education because of affordable tuition. If MDC's door closes, most of these students -- and our community -- will struggle with the effects of poverty for years to come.

We're last in spending on education, but we're at the head of the class for prison construction. Florida TaxWatch called the constant prison-funding increases "shocking." We spend \$100 million for each new prison and we're at 56 prisons statewide. The state budget for incarceration far exceeds the entire budget for all 28 community colleges. Florida expends more than \$20,000 a year per inmate, but contributes only \$2,927 a year to educate a full-time student at MDC.

These numbers cry out for an investment in community colleges, Florida's most cost-effective, high-quality avenue to economic growth.

The state Legislature can reverse a sorry funding trend with these simple steps: 1) fund enrollment growth, in MDC's case the 35,000 unfunded students now enrolled; 2) reverse the disastrous 19-percent decline since 2006 in funding per full-time equivalent student; and increase need-based funding for low-income students.

We hear much talk of Florida's world-class economy. But the first concern of relocating companies is the quality of the local workforce. What will we say to them? We have world-class ambitions? First-rate dreams?

That won't cut it. If we're not competitive, the reason will be that too few of our children had the chance to attend college, and fewer yet found good jobs in a state that failed to compete.

Our community is not wealthy. Beneath the allure, we are the second-poorest city in America when measured by median income. We desperately need to educate our people -- or risk creating an unthinkable divide. In a world of extraordinary technology the educated will become world citizens, connected as never before to economic advantage, while those shut out of educational opportunities will be excluded as never before.

Our students understand this new reality far better than the elders who make the rules. They know what's at stake and they wonder, too, what it will take for our leaders to understand that the future rides on how well we educate our people?

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